

IO4. SIAS China-EU Training Materials and Resources for Administrative and Service Staff



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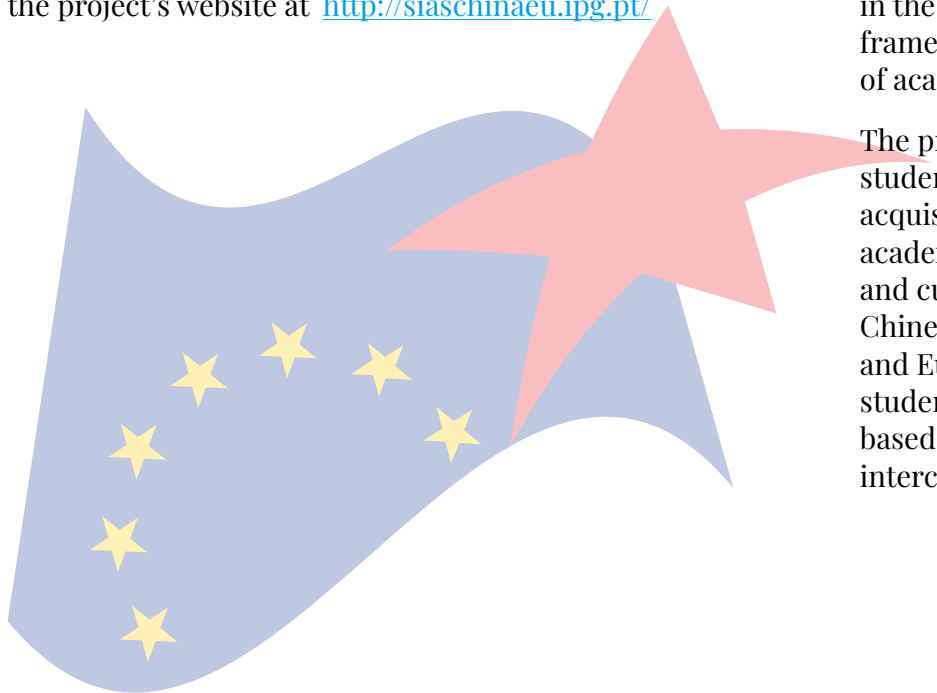
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01 Introduction

This material is part of the SIAS China-EU project funded by the European Union (European project ERASMUS+ number 2019-1-ES01-KA203-065990) and composed of a consortium of four universities: Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (UAB, Spain), Nottingham Trent University (NTU, United Kingdom), Technische Universität Hamburg (TUHH, Germany) and Instituto Politécnico da Guarda (IPG, Portugal). The project promotes the social inclusion and academic success of Chinese international students in European universities. More detailed information about SIAS China-EU can be found on the project's website at <http://siaschinaeu.ipg.pt/>



This ERASMUS+ project, Strategic Partnerships in Higher Education (K203), aims to provide an intervention model adjusted to the challenges faced by the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). This model is developed from an integral vision of higher education, with the aim of enhancing the induction of Chinese students, the teaching and learning process during their time at European universities, and the academic results achieved at the end of their studies under the paradigm of social and academic inclusion. Intercultural awareness is one of the most productive and essential factors in the practical development of internationalisation within the framework of a global inclusive education and the promotion of academic success among Chinese students.

The project aims to achieve greater social inclusion of Chinese students, to introduce them to the EHEA, to facilitate their acquisition of transversal competences optimising their academic learning, to familiarise them with the traditions and customs of the host country, to increase awareness of Chinese culture among teaching staff, administrative staff and European students, to optimise group cohesion among students, to develop a didactic-organisational methodology based on guidance and educational support and to facilitate intercultural communication between the agents involved.



In order to achieve this objective and the expected results, SIAS China-EU starts from the knowledge of the context of action (external and internal policies, characterisation of the EHEA and the specificity of each of the partner universities, the Chinese educational system, Chinese and European students and the rest of the agents involved), and the knowledge of good practices, shortcomings, obstacles and opportunities identified in studies prior to the project and in the design process followed during development (in terms of welcome plans, tutorial actions, administrative and teaching support, communication and teamwork competences, etc.).



01 Introduction

On this premise, SIAS China-EU has developed five intellectual outputs (IO), each being a self-contained entity aimed at a different educational agent: **IO1** is aimed at Chinese international students at European universities, **IO2** at local students and non-Chinese international students, **IO3** at teaching staff at European universities, **IO4** at administrative and service staff at European universities, and **IO5** at the global university community.

This document is Intellectual Output 4 (IO4), an educational material aimed at the administrative staff of European universities that receive Chinese international students.



Source: freepik.es

Its purpose is to provide resources and strategies helping administrative staff to promote the social inclusion and academic success of this growing group of students.

The main objectives of **IO4** are:

- To highlight socio-cultural differences and promote knowledge of Chinese society as a tool for the social and academic inclusion of Chinese students in the EHEA;
- To highlight the importance of communication in all actions of administrative and support staff;
- To provide the strategies, resources and theoretical and methodological tools necessary for smooth and high-quality intercultural communication with Chinese students within the EU;
- To promote the SIAS China-EU Global Initiative (IO5) through links between actions and actors.

The structure of this material corresponds to a self-learning training course based on studies conducted by the SIAS China-EU team on the needs, concerns, constraints, problems and good practices developed in European university settings.



Source: freepik.es

Firstly, it provides an insight into Chinese culture and the Chinese education system, the characteristics of Chinese international students (customs, habits, attitudes, etc.) and their impact on administrative procedures. Secondly, tools and strategies are provided to facilitate the tasks of administrative and service staff, while at the same time contributing positively to the social and academic inclusion of Chinese international students. Finally, practical experiences are shared.

02 Knowing the other

2.1 Traditional chinese culture

2.2 Chinese society today



The Great Wall of China

Source: @fanjianhua freepik.es

2.1 Traditional chinese culture

Our culture makes us. By “culture”, we mean the prevalent habits, values and beliefs of our own environment, i.e. our society, at this specific point in time.

Culture is perhaps the most important and uniquely human of all the tools devised by us so far. Human tools are generally intended to modify our surroundings, to increase our ability to shape our habitat in a way that suits us. Culture, by contrast, is used to modify ourselves: to continually shape ourselves in the way we imagine we are today, and, most importantly, the way we believe we should be tomorrow.

Culture is thus the ultimate code of our daily behaviour, from how we dress to what we regard as good or bad. We humans are social animals par excellence and as such, our culture (made by us) helps us to live together and move forward in time as a society around shared values. We are thus deeply moulded by it. Nevertheless, most of the time we are not aware of our own culture.

Culture’s influence is so pervasive that we do not actually see it; we take it for granted: it is “natural”. Indeed, at every time in history, each society has assumed its way of life is the way life should be. Our culture is thus our identity, so intrinsic to us that we just cannot see it.



For more information:



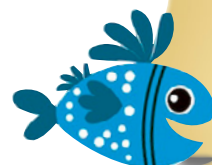
02 Knowing the other

There is a metaphor associated with the teachings of Taoism which explain in a simple and understandable way the essence of Taoism, a philosophical and spiritual tradition which can be very difficult to comprehend. With this metaphor Taoism try to teach people to look at the world beyond the way we understand it, and beyond reality that surrounds us. This is called DAO (or Tao, way, or path).

*A small young fish
approaches an old one
and all of a sudden asks
the most extraordinary
question of all:*

*—Where is the sea?
and the old fish replies:*

*— If you want to see
the sea, you must
climb a mountain.*



Sources: @anggar3ind @freepik
@macrovector@freepik

Our culture is our sea.

In this module we will reflect on the main traits that, from a Western perspective, are regarded as definitive of Chinese culture. We should keep in mind that **no appreciation of a different culture can be either complete or objective**, and that any such description is also by necessity a **simplification**: at any time in any society there will be individuals who, consciously or not, trespass and transgress the boundaries of their culture by following different lifestyles, ideas or values.

If you want to know who you are, you must detach from yourself. You must try to adopt the point of view of the others.

History shows us that very often these individuals are, inadvertently or not, preparing a new stage of their society's cultural pathway. This is especially so within the younger generations, especially nowadays, when social media promotes a truly global exchange of cultures and values.



Source: @freestockcenter @freepik



Conceptual mediation between China and Europe

An introduction to the millenary Chinese civilization

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20 September 2020



02 Knowing the other

Hierarchy and **order** are two of the most useful concepts with which to begin our understanding of Chinese culture. They pervade the whole of Chinese culture and its multimillennial history.

Perhaps surprisingly for us modern Europeans, these two values are not necessarily oppressive or negative: within traditional Chinese culture, **hierarchy** and **order** are the way to ensure **harmony**, or peaceful daily coexistence. From this derives a distinctive sense of belonging and bonding: you exist within a group; you are, to a great extent, defined by the group.

The consequences of this are clear in terms of those values deeply appreciated in Chinese thought and ethics: **obedience**, **discipline** and **reticence**.

As a result, **respect for authority** (as an expression of the order of your group) becomes a preeminent value. This is not limited to social or political authority but rather encompasses other relationships much more intimate and personal wherein **authority figures** can be delineated: the elderly, teachers, grandparents and parents, husbands (in the case of females), older siblings and so on. Due to this emphasis on **preserving harmony** (i.e. avoiding conflict), specific attitudes or behaviours, namely filial piety, faithfulness, brotherhood, loyalty and sincerity, are regarded as key personal virtues.



Source: @8photo freepik.es

Within this environment, the individual's existence is seen in terms of **duties** rather than rights. For example, according to Confucianism, any individual (although the implicit meaning here is "any male") is expected during his lifetime to fulfil his duties of having children and raising them properly, working hard and making money (i.e., not being a burden on society).

It is the degree of conformity with these goals that decides the goodness and worthiness of the individual and his life. It would then appear that Chinese culture does not revolve around individuals; instead, its emphasis is placed on people's social dimension and their compliance with society's rules.

The roots of this cultural matrix are complex, and even a succinct description would take an entire book. Nevertheless, it is fair to say that at least judging by the teachings of its greatest sages, Confucius and Laozi, Chinese culture leads to a **drive to see beyond yourself**.



02 Knowing the other



Source: @cookie_studio_freepik.es

Like any culture emphasising conformity with social norms and group harmony, Chinese culture demarcates any transgression very clearly: it has a strong sense of **shame** and of **losing face**, or in other words, losing the respect of one's group and becoming an outcast. Again, **obedience**, **discipline** and **reticence** are cardinal elements of Chinese ethics.

As can easily be imagined, all these cultural traits have shaped **language**, which is their verbal and non-verbal expression. The emphasis is placed on **hierarchy** and **respect**, and indirect communication is preferred to direct statement. Here are just a few examples:



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Source: @benzoix_freepik.es



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- The Chinese language uses honorifics to denote **respect** and **awareness of position within the group**. The rules governing their use are not absolute and invariable (unlike the use of a professional title such as "Dr.") but rather depend on the relative hierarchical status of those participating in the conversation. The use of a plain name to address somebody is regarded as rude, and if done, is likely to produce an alienating effect.
- There are several ways to say "no" without sounding bluntly negative. Chinese culture does not advocate saying a plain "no" in many social circumstances.



02 Knowing the other

2.2 Chinese society today

The fundamental feature that defines today's Chinese society is a political one: the existence of a socialist state. This dates to 1949, with the foundation of the People's Republic of China (PRC).

China's political system is deeply embedded in its education system: the constitution establishes education as a way to promote **love for the motherland, the people, work, science and socialism**.

Education must lead to **patriotism, collectivism, internationalism and communism**.

Article 1. *The People's Republic of China is a socialist state under the people's democratic dictatorship led by the working class and based on the alliance of workers and peasants.*

1982 Constitution of the People's Republic of China



Mao proclaiming the establishment of PRC in 1949

Source: commons.wikimedia.org

Similarly, according to the Law on Education of 1995, education in the PRC must be aimed at socialist modernisation and must combine production with work, with the purpose of **satisfying the needs of the socialist society through the development of morality, intelligence and good physical condition**.

Nevertheless, it is fair to say that today's China actively promotes the preeminence of society's goals over those of individuals: its constitution places a noticeable emphasis on **civic duties** counterbalancing **rights** (e.g., the right and duty to work, the duty to honour and defend the motherland, the duty to practice family planning, etc.).

This stance would certainly resonate with those traditional cultural traits (described in our previous section) that emphasise **hierarchy, order and social harmony**.



National emblem of the People's Republic of China

Source: commons.wikimedia.org



02 Knowing the other

However, as may be anticipated, this social dynamic is not necessarily conducive to the appreciation of concepts and values associated with European individual-centred culture such as **privacy**, **personal time**, and **private life** in general.

This preeminence of society over individuals can be disconcerting for Europeans (to say the least) and can be a significant challenge for foreigners trying to settle in China. Nevertheless this trait appears to be shared by other Far-Eastern countries such as Japan and South Korea.

The steady economic progress made by China in recent decades, together with the accompanying scientific and technological developments, has also brought a new sense of national pride. However, exposure to global **popular culture and social media** is having a significant impact on younger Chinese people.

This, together with increasing opportunities to travel, study and work abroad, has allowed them to experience different cultures and perspectives. These factors may influence their behaviour when abroad.



Source: @pressfoto freepik.es

Chinese international students bring us closer to their culture in terms of traditions, customs and habits.



A few of the social networks used in China



03 Challenges facing overseas chinese students



Source: @jigsawstocker freepik.es

Any newly-arrived overseas student (regardless of their country of origin) must deal with a series of challenges in addition to those related to successfully taking an academic course.

For local people, most of these challenges, if not all, are seen as part of **ordinary daily life**: they are situations we take for granted and have been familiar with since childhood. Being in line with our own culture, these situations appear to us as “natural”. Often the most difficult challenges faced

by the overseas student are also the most inconspicuous: unfamiliar weather, social conventions, language and food, being far from family and friends, loneliness, and the practicalities of an autonomous and independent daily life.

Owing to these multiple challenges, it is not surprising that overseas students’ academic performance tends to suffer and is often below that of their local classmates. This difference is perhaps exacerbated by the fact that many foreign students travel abroad in search of postgraduate education, which is, by definition, more demanding than a first degree.

Awareness of these complex situations has led to a paradigm shift in our understanding, moving away from looking for a single issue or difficulty that would explain any underlying academic performance issue.

Specifically, in **relation to Chinese overseas students**, analysis of this situation has moved away from the traditional view that attributed the cause mainly to the language barrier. Studies on this issue have been able to identify specific variables that articulate the problem more effectively. Most importantly, these studies point towards

the need for the kind of support and advice that could be provided by European universities, guiding our practice towards a more sympathetic and inclusive approach.

These variables include the following:

- **Pressure to achieve and succeed**
- **Study skills and learning culture**
- **Lack of awareness of Chinese cultural expectations and assumptions among teaching and administrative staff**
- **Chinese students’ understanding of the concepts of authorship, originality and plagiarism**
- **Impact of cultural differences when working in teams**
- **Perceived tendency towards isolation among Chinese students**



03 Challenges facing overseas chinese students

■ Pressure to achieve and succeed

Going abroad to pursue an academic education is a huge undertaking in terms of financial investment. Invariably, parents and relatives bear the economic cost, seeing it as a way to boost the future professional career of their offspring.

This is perhaps especially true in the case of China since educational and professional achievements are traditionally seen as belonging primarily to the family (i.e. a source of parental pride) rather than to the individual in question.

Owing to the **one-child policy** (一孩政策, *Yi hai zhengce*, a population-planning initiative in China implemented between 1980 and 2015 setting a limit of one on the number of children per family), often the only son or daughter is the bearer of an entire family's hopes and expectations of social betterment.

Therefore, it is easy to imagine that some Chinese overseas students may feel great pressure to succeed and overachieve. In some cases, all these expectations, added to the inherent challenges of living and studying abroad, may have a detrimental effect on the students' mental health and well-being.

An additional negative consequence of this situation (heightened parental hopes, significant financial investment) is the development of a very pragmatic goal-oriented mentality focusing on obtaining an academic title as the overarching objective, often to the detriment of appreciating and enjoying the experience of learning per se.



Source: @pch.vector freepik.es

03 Challenges facing overseas chinese students

Study skills and learning culture

It has been pointed out in numerous studies from a Western perspective that Chinese pedagogical methodology favours rote learning: it is repetitive and based on memorisation techniques.

Consequently, Chinese students often find it difficult to adopt the critique- and debate-led approach so characteristic of European education in general.

Indeed, our teaching methods and student-centred learning experience are among those aspects Chinese students find to be most novel (and challenging) during their time at European academic institutions.

At this point, it is important to realise that for some Chinese students, the mere fact of being in a European classroom can be a culture shock in and of itself.

In a survey carried out by the SIAS China-EU project, Chinese students found every one of ten fundamental teaching and learning activities at their host institutions to be very different from their equivalents in China, although to local students, the activities in question would seem normal or expected. Paramount among them was “teaching methods”, with 92% of respondents finding them quite novel and different from what they had been used to back in China.

Survey question: *Select the aspects you find to be different between studying in China and your current European host university*

Activity	Percentage %
Teaching methods	92
Timetabling and lecture schedules	88
Behaviour in the classroom	86
Task allocation	85
Interaction with academic staff	83
Students’ leeway to shape their own studies	82
Extent of active participation expected from students	81
Evaluation methods	78
Room arrangement and space layout	76
Amount of work done in teams	76



03 Challenges facing overseas chinese students

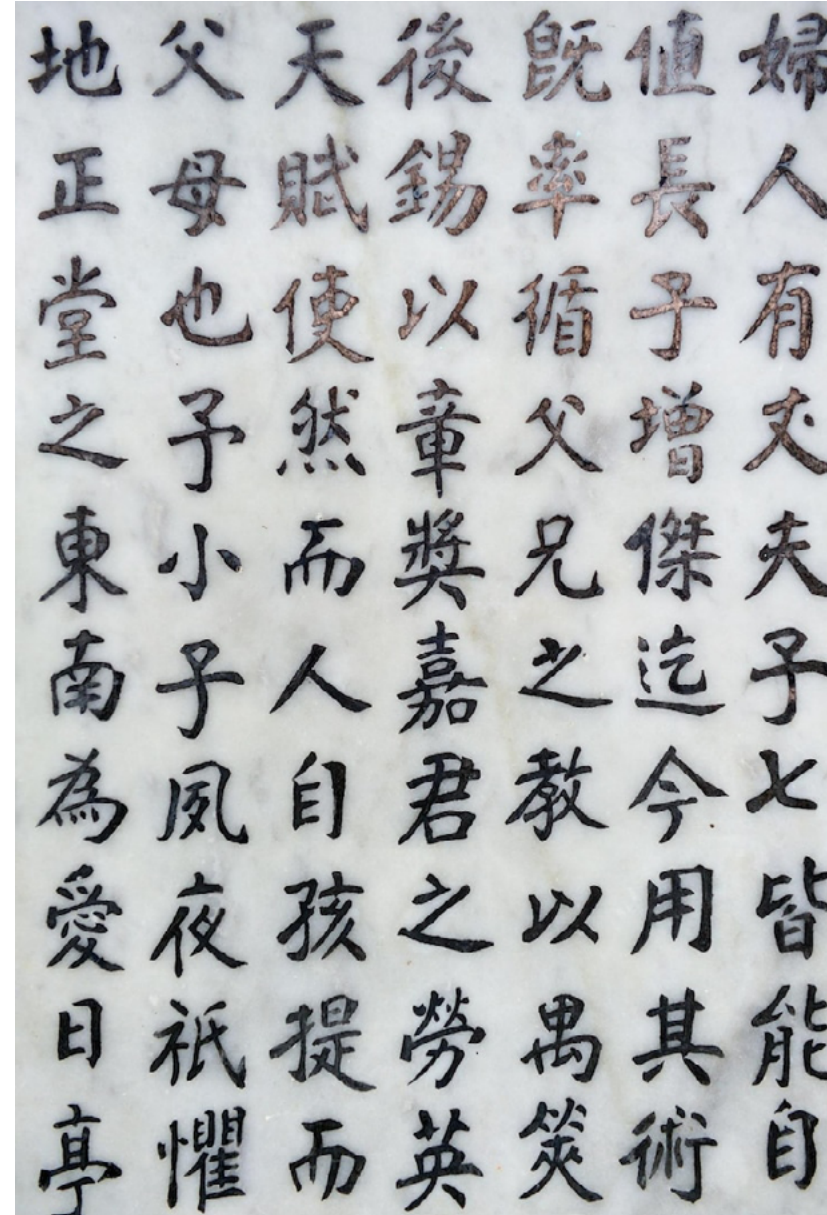


The reason for the aforementioned prevalence of rote learning in Chinese education could be found in the need to master the thousands of different characters used in Chinese writing. The average Chinese person needs to know between 3,500 and 6,000 characters in order to read newspapers, textbooks and official documentation, while graduates know even more.

It has also been argued that the Chinese writing system is at the root of the Chinese tendency to think in visual/spatial rather than verbal terms, and to emphasise particulars rather than universals (which may discourage abstract thought).

Nevertheless, it is unlikely that Chinese students' difficulty with critical learning could be ascribed to a single cause. As is often the case when comparing cultures, the perceived differences can also be due to elements found in one culture and lacking in the other; for instance, the tradition of critical thinking in Western culture undoubtedly owes something to classical Greek philosophy, the Protestant Reformation and the Enlightenment, none of which form part of Chinese history and culture.

Nevertheless, although this difficulty with critical thinking and abstract thought seem to be real, caution should be observed when attempting to extrapolate it into a more general realm: this cultural trait has not impeded China (and other culturally similar Far-Eastern countries like Japan and South Korea) in mastering and excelling in the assimilation and application of Western science and technology, both of which activities are closely associated with Western critical thinking and abstract thought.



Source: @TravelScape freepik.es



03 Challenges facing overseas chinese students

Lack of awareness of Chinese cultural expectations and assumptions among teaching and administrative staff

Knowledge and **experience** are what Chinese students tend to appreciate most in teachers. However, owing to their strong sense of **respect** for **authority** and **reticence**, Chinese students are not used to asking questions of teachers, or asking for clarification, and still less to pointing out mistakes.

This can often give the false impression that the students either lack interest or have understood everything. Similarly, the students' characteristic avoidance of expressing themselves in a direct and open way in their native language is bound to affect their usage of any foreign language, especially at the beginning of their stay.

In some cases, needs and requests for help may not be articulated with the urgency required, while in other circumstances the opposite may be true: the language of their host country may appear too simple and not sophisticated enough to communicate a nuanced message, resulting in poor communication on both sides.

It is thus important to start building clear communication around specific challenges, be they practical or academic, and to facilitate any help required to solve them. This requires patience and good judgement as well as empathy and, sometimes, a sense of humour to lighten any misunderstanding.



Source: @starline freepik.es

Chinese students' understanding of the concepts of authorship, originality and plagiarism

Often, Chinese students seem to have a weak perception of the role of individuals in the elaboration and production of intellectual work (in relation to matters such as copyright).

This problem is by no means exclusive to Chinese international students, and has been also observed in other communities of overseas students at European universities (including, for instance, students from India).

In the case of Chinese students, it may reflect the prevalent collectivist ethos of China's socialist system. It also manifests in a pragmatic and utilitarian attitude towards assimilating and appropriating Western scientific and technological developments, something observed in other Asian countries such as Japan and South Korea.

Be that as it may, this is an area where clear, strong advice and tools should be provided to make the students fully aware of the need to avoid committing plagiarism and risking academic penalties and disciplinary proceedings.

Access to and training in applications such as Turnitin is highly recommended.



03 Challenges facing overseas chinese students

Impact of cultural differences when working in teams

Owing to the importance of **group acceptance** in Chinese culture, Chinese students may appear oversensitive to criticism when working in teams, or even when being asked for a clarifying comment.

As a coping mechanism, students often adopt a passive, quiet, diffident stance, which in turn is susceptible to being mistaken for a lack of interest in the task assigned to the group. In general, it is advisable not to place a lone Chinese student within a working group: she or he may find this overwhelming.

Additionally, in situations like this, local students may benefit from guidance and guidelines encouraging cross-cultural awareness.



Source: @lookstudio freepik.es

Perceived tendency towards isolation among Chinese students

This is one of the most common traits observed among Chinese students and in overseas students' communities in general.

Although the urge to stick together with one's fellow countrymen is understandable, this tendency can nevertheless have **very negative consequences**, affecting the students' learning and practice of their host country's language, depriving them of a more genuine and realistic knowledge of their host society, and impeding their acquisition of practical and social skills which could enrich their experience of living abroad.



Source: @pressfoto freepik.es



04 Practical recommendations for administrative staff

4.1 What kind of help may be requested of you?

It may be useful to start this final section by highlighting a key positive aspect which is frequently overlooked: the fact that overseas students often are **highly motivated individuals**.

As a young person you really need to be very committed to your own goals to choose to abandon the comfort of your home, your friends, your own society, language and culture, in order to travel and study in a distant country.

Certainly, family and social expectations probably play a part in galvanising that decision, nevertheless the students are not embarking on a holiday but rather setting themselves the challenge of achieving an academic qualification in a strange, unknown place. **Time-management, discipline, resourcefulness, and perseverance** are skills frequently found among overseas students regardless of their nationality.

So, although they may face cross-cultural challenges that require our help, foremost, they have chosen to be here and are very keen to succeed. This is particularly the case with Chinese students and their selection of academic institutions.

Given their high hopes for a future professional career and the significant financial and personal involved, Chinese prospective overseas students tend to be highly conscious of the prestige or social perception of any academic institution being considered.

In many cases, rather than following a simple ranking-based decision process, they identify very specific courses and well-known teaching staff. Indeed, in a survey carried out by this project, encompassing 98 students at partner universities, 88% of respondents selected **“the nature of the degree offered”** as one of the main reasons for their university choice, whereas 58% chose the **“institution’s world ranking”** (e.g. as established by QS World University Rankings).



Source: @pikisuperstar freepik.es

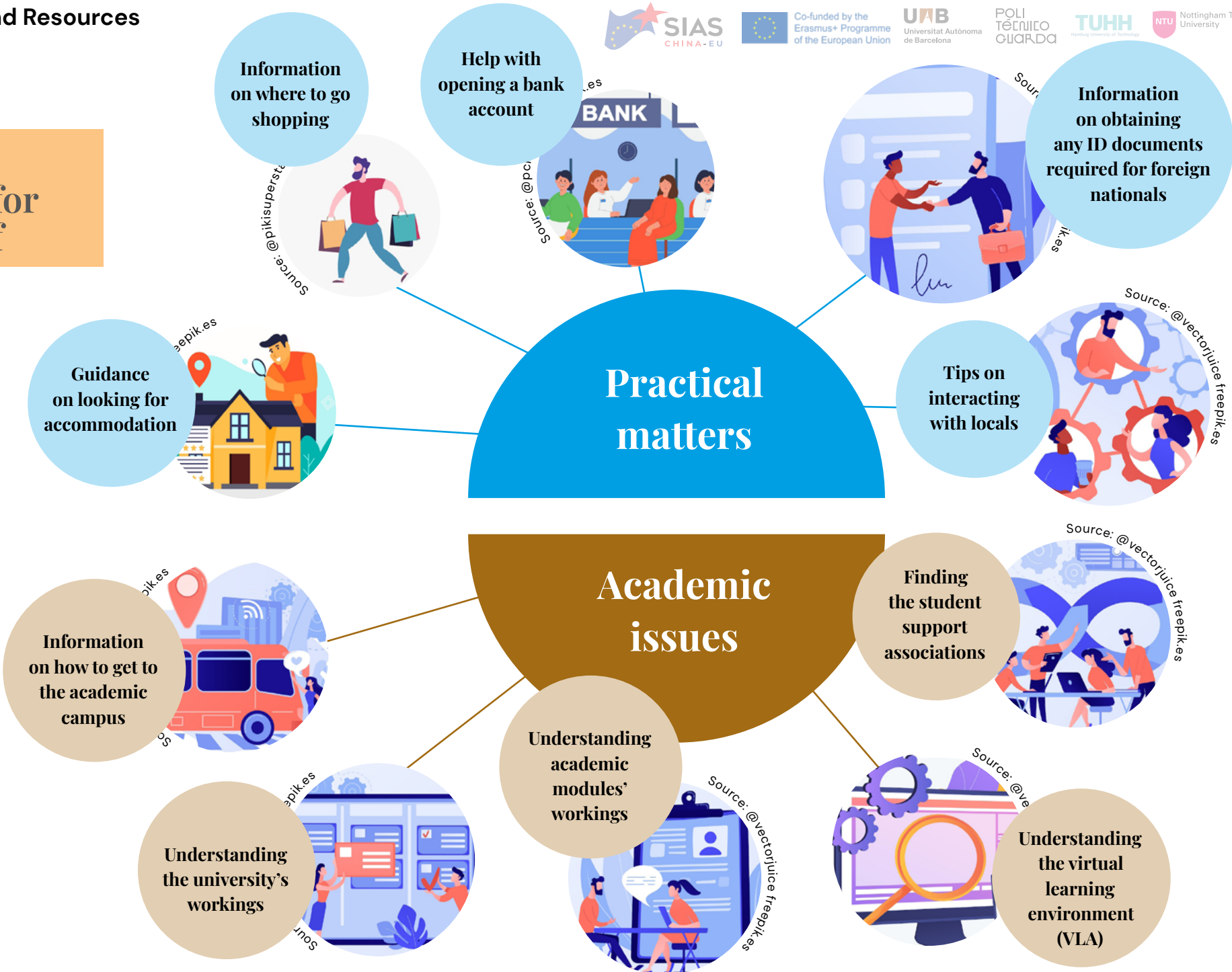


04 Practical recommendations for administrative staff

The same survey also identified **10 top key practical issues** with which newly-arrived Chinese students felt **they needed help and did not get it at the time of starting their studies**.

We focused on the initial period (i.e. the period immediately after the students' arrival) since this is usually when the students face the most challenges and are most likely to approach administrative and service staff for help. We have divided those into the following practical matters and academic issues (see right side figure).

Moreover, half of the students stated that they would have benefited from help with the matters listed above.



04 Practical recommendations for administrative staff

As part of the SIAS China-EU project, we have compiled information helping Chinese students (IO1) to cope with these issues.



We would really appreciate your pointing out this information to any Chinese student who requests help with these matters. Additionally, it would be useful to familiarise yourself with the document so that you will be able to provide more focused advice.

Furthermore, we have compiled **good practice recommendations** relating to activities and situations falling within the remit of your administrative and service activities, that are useful for guiding students.

The compilation is based primarily on comments obtained in our survey of Chinese students, as well as on conclusions and insights from experts and speakers at our formative international workshops (*Intercultural Awareness Training & Inclusivity in Higher Education*, September 2020).

■ Activities to Welcome International Students

Although most universities have “Welcome Weeks” at the start of the academic year, we recommend organising a meeting to which all the international students are invited (not just the Chinese ones).

This would be an ideal opportunity to provide help and information on practical matters (see above) as well as listening to any questions and concerns the students may have at this challenging time when so many things are new to them.

We suggest that the meeting is attended by administrative, service and academic staff, along with students’ union representatives, to provide a representative sample of the university’s stakeholders.

Additionally, bringing all the international students together would boost the sense of sharing the same challenges and promote mutual help networking and making friends.



Source: @pikisuperstar freepik.es



04 Practical recommendations for administrative staff

■ Appointment of tutors for international students

Although most universities make a great deal of information available online, very often the sheer volume of this information makes it difficult to assimilate and utilise efficiently.

This is especially true for international students, who are approaching the material from the perspective of a different language and different national system (e.g., registration and access to health systems differ markedly from one country to another).

One of the recurrent wishes expressed by international students is for the appointment of named tutors (i.e., administrative liaison staff) who are easily accessible and can be contacted directly if necessary. This type of support may not necessarily be offered by teaching staff (i.e., academic tutors) who typically focus on academic issues related to very specific assessments, modules and so on.

Similarly, as might be expected, academic tutorial groups consist of a mixture where local students are predominant, and are therefore not necessarily the best setting for discussion of practical matters pertaining to international students.



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04 Practical recommendations for administrative staff

■ Promotion of and easy access to counselling support



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Sympathetic and timely counselling support should be available to help students deal with emotional issues likely to arise from being away from relatives and familiar surroundings, and from the pressure and constant practical stresses associated with being an overseas student.

It is important that counsellors are aware of differences between cultures in the ways emotional and mental health issues are perceived and dealt with.

Ideally, counsellors should be aware of specific factors which may come into to play in this complex and sensitive situation (gender, religious beliefs, social stigma and so on).



04 Practical recommendations for administrative staff

■ Ongoing staff training in inclusivity and interculturality (i.e. cross-cultural issues)

As stated in our introduction, the ultimate objective of our project is simple: to enhance your professional capacity, as a university staff member, to engage respectfully and communicate effectively in an intercultural context.

The increasing internationalisation of the European higher education system reflects the globalised world we live in today.

Thus, developing intercultural competences should be an essential part of our institutions' commitment to inclusivity and to the building of a learning environment wherein everybody can thrive and achieve to the best of their potential.



Source: @upklyak freepik.es



05 Experiences, perceptions and attitudes of administrative staff











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